A Note on the Rigvedic Phrase "Sapta-Sindhu"

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I. Background:

In the first chapter of **Vendidad** (*Vidēvdād-1.18)* the Younger Avestan Text, there is a mention of 16 different favourable lands created by **Ahura Mazda** for the ancient **People or Tribes** who had firm faith in the Supreme God especially to protect them from the evil character called as **Angra Mainyu**. The names of sixteen Avestan countries/districts or locations wherein the Avestan People enjoyed settled life during the ancient period are given in Table-1 (Source -Wikipedia).

Table-1

Serial Number	Avestan Name	Modern Name
1	Airyana Vaeja	Eastern Part of Iran
2	Gava/Sughdha	Soghdiana (Samarkand)
3	Mouru	Marv /Margu/Margiana
4	Bakhdhi	Balkh /Bactria
5	Nisaya	?
6	Haroyu	Harat/Aria (rud)
7	Vaekereta	Gandhara
8	Urva	?
9	Vehrkana	Gurgan/ Gorjan
10	Harahvaiti	Arachosia/Arghand
11	Haetumant	Helmend
12	Ragha	Teharan/Rai
13	Chakhra	?
14	Varena	Gîlan or Buner or Tabaristan
15	**Hapta-Hendu**	**Sapta-Sindhu/Greater Punjab**
16	Ranjha	Area adjoining river **Rasa of Rigved**?

Initially, the researchers who studied the **Avestan Documents** could not make out the meaning of "**Hapta-Hendu**" term. But when some of them gave serious thought over it, then they were able to link it with the Rigvedic phrase "**Sapta-Sindhu**". As the Composer of **Vendidad** gave the second to last preference to "**Hapta-Hendu**" land means, at that time it was located away from their place of living. Still it manifests that the People of "**Sapta-Sindhu**" were somewhat close to Avestan philosophy, and threfore the **Avestan Singer** took keen interest in recording their place of living. In other words, both Iranian Ariayans/Airyana and Rigvedic Aryas had common origin.

Sixteen names of the countries belonging to the Avestan Geography do cover the cold mountain ranges of Central Asia running from the Pamir to the Hindu Kush and the bordering Karakoram- an adjoining part of the Himalayas, plus the plains like Sapta-Sindhu of the South-East Asia (the land of seven rivers) as well. It is said that the Old Iranians changed the ancient Vedic "**S**" into "**H**", and hence the phrase **Sapta- Sindhu** of **Rigved** became ***Hapta-Hendu*** in **Avesta**.

Above information gives rise to some questions :

1. Why did the Avestan Composer identify "**Sapta-Sindhu**" term as the region of Aryas?
2. When did the Rigvedic phrase "**Sapta-Sindhu**" become equivalent to the land or country?
3. Why did the **Avestan Poet** restrict himself to **Sapta-Sindhu** region only, and did not bother about the other areas like **Far East** or **Southern** part of river **Saraswati** of the **Indian Sub-continent**?

In the present essay, we shall try to find the answers to the afore-stated questions.

II. "Sapta-Sindhu" phrase – as it appears in Rigved:

Rigvedic word "**Sindhu**" generically means a river, a sea/ocean, and river **Sindhu** proper. **Table-2** provides information on the use of "**Sapta-Sindhu**" phrase by the various Poets.

Table-2

Verse Number	Variants of "Sapta-Sindhu" term used by the Rigvedic Poets	Role of other Characters/Features in shaping real meaning of " Sapta-Sindhu"
Rv-1.32,12	**सप्त सिन्धून** /sapta sindhūn	**Indra** makes **Seven Rivers** to flow**.**
Rv-1.35,8	**सप्त सिन्धून** /sapta sindhūn	**Savitar** lights up **deserts** and **Seven Rivers.**
Rv-2.12,3	**सप्त सिन्धून** /sapta sindhūn	**Indra** slays **Ahi** and frees **Seven Rivers**.
Rv-2.12,12	**सप्तसिन्धून /s**aptasindhūn	**Indra** sets free **Seven Rivers** to flow.
Rv-4.28,1	**सप्त सिन्धून / s**aptasindhūn	**Indra** kills **Ahi** and releases **Seven Rivers.**
Rv-8.24,27	**सप्त सिन्धुषु** /sapta sindhuṣ u	**Indra** needs to take care of the **Aryas** of **Seven Rivers.**
Rv-8.54,4	**सप्त सिन्धवः** /sapta sindhavaḥ	The Poet seeks help from **Pushan, Vishnu, Saraswati** and **Seven Rivers.**
Rv-8.69,12	**सप्त सिन्धवः** /sapta sindhavaḥ	**Varuna** is the maker of **Seven Rivers.**
Rv-9.66,6	**सप्त सिन्धवः** /sapta sindhavaḥ	Flow of **Soma** is compared with **Seven Rivers** and then equated with **Milch Cows.**
Rv-10.43,3	**सप्त सिन्धवो** /sapta sindhavo	Heavy rain due to **Indra** is the main cause for onward flowing of **Seven Rivers.**
Rv-10.67,12	**सप्त सिन्धून** /sapta sindhūn	**Indra** slains **Ahi** and rescues S**even Rivers.**

III. Observations and Discussion on the Table-2 Data:

1. In the **Three Early Mandalas** i.e. Mandala **3**, **6**, **7**; and in **Mandala-5** (the **First** among the **Five Late Mandalas**) rigvedic phrase **Sapta-Sindhu** is conspicuously absent.
2. **Rv-2,12** is the hymn dedicated to **Indra** of **Mandala-2**, wherein the said term is found twice in the two separate verses.
3. Out of total **Eleven** references, **Seven** belong to the hymns dedicated to **Indra**, **One** is found in the verse addressed to **Varuna**, but that verse belongs the hymn devoted to **Indra-Varuna** jointly, and **One Each** in the hymn dedicated to **Savitar, Soma,** and **Brihaspati.**
4. The verse **Rv-1.35,8** describes God **Savitar** simultaneously illuminates the **Deserts** and **Sapta-Sindhu/Seven Rivers** with **his** rays. Since the word **Desert** represents an arid land, hence phrase **Sapta-Sindhu** needs to be taken as the name of **Region** or **Country**.
5. In the verse **Rv-8.24,27**; the Poet requests **Indra** to look after the **Aryas** of **Sapta-Sindhu**. Prior to the "**War of Ten Kings**", **Indra** was the god of the **Priests** and the **Bharatas**. After the win in war, the Rigvedic Priests go closer to the "**Five Tribes of Rigved**" who in turn become the followers of the Rigvedic Philosophy. This has been highlighted by the Composer of **Mandala-5** in the verses **Rv-5.32,11**, and **Rv-5.35,2**. During the second part of **Mandala-5**, except **Puru**, along with the **Priests; Anu, Turvasa,** and **Yadu** relocated themselves from east to west of river **Sindhu**. It means to say that the **Aryas** who lived earlier in the area bound by the **Seven Rivers** are now present in the region located to west of river **Sindhu.** Since pre-Rigvedic time, **Druhyu** tribe lived in the west of river **Sindhu**. Hence the Composer appeals to **Indra** to pay equal attention to all of them (**Aryans**).
6. Therefore, two references **Rv-1.35,8**; and **Rv-8.24,27** could be taken as the **Land** or **Region** as the contents of both verses **do not exhibit** flow of water or release of the rivers from the captivity of Dragon/Ahi or the Composer requesting them to help in some form (**Rv-8.54,4**).
7. With reference to **Sapta-Sindhu** phrase, content-wise, the verse **Rv-10.67,12** is very similar to the verses **Rv-1.32,12; Rv-2.12,3; Rv-2.12,12;** and **Rv-4.28,1** as all five verses talk about a mythical act as "**Indra** rescues **Seven Rivers** from the clutches of dragon **Ahi"**. Yet the verse **Rv-10.67,12** brings out the fact that during the composition of the **Mandala-10** also (the **Last Mandala of Rigved**), from the availability of water point of view, the condition of **Seven Rivers** was very grim. The verse **Rv-10.43,3** conveys same thing, and after heavy downpour/rain only (the Singer has described it as an act of **Indra**), **Seven Rivers** start advancing. It means, at that time also, all **seven** were the **rain-fed rivers**. This could be the main reason for the subsequent settlement of the **Rigvedic People** in the **Doab** (Ganga-Yamana) region of the Far East part of Rigvedic Territoty.

In short, **Rv-1.35,8**; and **Rv-8.24,27** the two out of total eleven references of "**Sapta-Sindhu**" phrase do qualify as the "**land of the Seven Famous Rivers of Rigved**".

IV. Presence of the terms similar to "Sapta-Sindhu" in Rigved:

In **Rigved**, other than the "**Sapta-Sindhu"** phrase, the Poets in different Mandalas have used terms like Sapta-Yahvi; Sapta-Svasā, Sapta-Matr etc to express their affection for the Seven Important Rivers of the document. **Table-3** gives English meanings of some Rigvedic words used by the Rigvedic Singers in their **Songs of Praise** and below the verses wherein these terms are seen.

Table-3 [1, 2, 3]

Rigvedic words used to indicate river	Meaning in English
Yavhi/यह्वी, Nadi, Avani	**River/flood**
Svasa ष्वसा/ Svasar स्वसृ /Jami जामि	**Sister**
Matru मातृ/Mata	**Mother**
Srava/Srotasta/Visrava/Ksarati क्षरति	**Stream/flow**
Pravata	**Current**

A. **Sapta Yahvi/सप्त यह्वी**/ Seven mighty rivers/Seven strong floods : **Five References**

Rv-1.71,7 : sravataḥ sapta yahvīḥ

Rv- 1.72,8 : sapta yahvī rāyo

Rv-3.1,4 : sapta yahvīḥ śvetaṃ

Rv-4.13,3: sapta yahvī spaśaṃ

Rv-9.92,4: nadyaḥ sapta yahvīḥ

B. **Sapta Svasarah/ सप्तस्वसा**/Seven Sisters: **Nine References**

Rv-1.164,3: sapta svasāro

Rv-1.191,14: sapta mayūryaḥ sapta svasāro aghruvaḥ

Rv-6.61,10: priyāsu saptasvasā sujuṣ ṭ āśeven sisters

Rv-7.66,15 : sapta svasāraḥ suvitāya

Rv-8.41,2: sindhūnāmupodaye saptasvasā

Rv-8.59,4: sapta svasāraḥ sadana ṛ tasya

Rv-9.66,8: sapta jāmayaḥ /seven sisters

Rv-9.86,36: sapta svasāro abhi

Rv-10.5,5 : sapta svasṝraruṣ īrvāvaśāno /Seven Red Sisters

C. **Sapta Matru**/ Seven Mothers : **Six References**

Rv-1.34,8: Sindhubhiḥ saptamātṛ bhi /seven mothers

Rv-1.141,2: saptaśivāsu mātṛ ṣ u/ seven auspicious mothers

Rv-7.36,6: sarasvatī saptathī sindhumātā/ Saraswati seventh among the river mothers

Rv-8.96,1: Apo Matarah Sapta/seven watery mothers

Rv-9.102,4: Sapta Mataro/ Seven Mothers

Rv-10.107,4**:** Duhite Saptamātaram/ daughters of seven mother**s**

D. **Sapta Srava**/Seven Streams : **Six References**

Rv-1.102,2: śravo nadyaḥ sapta/ seven flowing rivers

Rv-6.7,6 : sapta visruhaḥ /seven swift flowing streams

Rv-7.67,8: sapta sravato ratho ghāt

Rv-10.5,5: sapta svasṝraruṣ īrvāvaśāno

Rv-10.49,9: sapta sravato dhārayaṃ

Rv-10.8,5: sapta kṣ aranti /seven flows

E. Other phrases found in Rigved: **Six References**

Rv-1.102,2: नद्यः सप्त/ nadyaḥ sapta/ rivers seven

Rv-4.19,3 : sapta prati pravata/ seven prone rivers as **Ahi/**अहिं word is present in the verse.

Rv-7.18,24 : saptedindraṃ na sravato/ seven flowing rivers praise Indra?

Rv-9.54,2: sapta pravataā divam/seven current flowing through the sky.

Rv-10.64,8 : Sapta Sasra Nadyo

Rv-10.104,8 : Sapta Apo Devihi/Seven water Goddesses

Mandala-wise information compiled on the similar Rigvedic phrases such as Sapta-Sindhu, Seven Rivers, Seven Sisters, Seven Mothers, Seven Streams, Seven Waters etc is given below.

Mandala-wise Data: **1(10), 2(2), 3(1), 4(3), 6(2), 7(4), 8(6), 9(6), 10(9)**

From the above data, it is evident that no Poet from **Atri** clan while composing the hymns of **Mandala-5** used **Sapta-Sindhu** or similar phrase in their Poems of Praise. Also the frequency of the terms in other Four Late Mandalas is found to be more than the Five Early Mandalas.

As described earlier, though the **Avestan Composer** has used **Hapta-Hendu** phrase only once in the Younger Avesta, yet there is no doubt about its application indicates **Land** or **Country** of the People.

Here a fresh question arises;

Why did the Avestan Poet select **Hapta-Hendu** phrase to indicate Region or Land?

Only possibility is, the term would have been in use since a long time, and the Composer would be knowing the locality as the "Country of the Aryas" located further to his place of dwelling.

It must be remembered here that **Ahura Mazda**, the **Supreme God** of **Avestan People** carries the traits of **God Varuna** of **Vedic Philosophy**. **Varuna** is One of the **Seven Adityas;** the latter were created together much earlier to God **Indra**. In **Rigved**, **Indra** is the Supreme Deity, but in Avesta, **He** is a demon of minor nature. When Avestan Composer points out **Hapta-Hendu** as the land of Aryas from a distance, means at the time of composition of the verse, he at least knows the past history of the place.

In **Vendidad 1.18** the **Avestan Poet** clearly talks about the proper residence of the **Vedic People**, but the **Vedic Aryas**, at the time of composition of **Five Early Mandalas of Rigved** have no idea of the whereabouts of the **Avestan People**. The hymn **Rv-8.96** of **Mandala-8** hints at the **verbal clash** between the **believers** and the **non-believers** of **Indra**. In the hymn **Rv-10.124;** the **Rigvedic Composer** highlights presence of the **People of Other Lineage** (outside the Rigvedic Territory) who too worship God **Agni**, **Varuna** and use **Soma** in **Yajna** rite, but their Supreme God has been described as **Pitre Asura/Father Asura,** totally different from **Rigvedic Indra**. It shows that, the ancestors of the **Avestan People** who purposely downgraded **Indra** were originally from the **Sapta-Sindhu** region, but moved out of the **Rigvedic Territory** at the end of **Mandala-8**.

V : Why does "Sapta-Sindhu" term go missing in Mandala-3, 6, 7, and 5?

Many experts say that, the **Sapta-Sindhu** region of **Rigved** probably had river **Saraswati** as its eastern border, and river **Sindhu** as the western boundary. The term also includes Five Rigvedic Rivers that flowed in between these two main rivers i.e. **Sutudri**, **Vipas**, **Parusni**, **Asikni**, and **Vitasta**. Whereas, some see river **Saraswati** alone as the symbol of "**Sapta-Sindhu**" of **Rigved**.

Based on the description available in the verses **Rv-6.61,10** and **Rv-8.54,4** some scholars feel that river **Saraswati** and her **Seven Sisters** (rivers) form the group of rivers of the **Sapta-Sindhu** area.

As mentioned earlier, **Sapta-Sindhu** phrase is found in Six out of Ten Mandalas of Rigved. But there is no possibility of getting proper answer to afore-stated question from the Rigvedic document. Hence only option is left to us, to find the answer outside the text.

Mandala-3, **6**, and **7** belong to the class of the **Five Early Mandalas** of **Rigved**. In these Mandalas, names of the rivers from westside of river **Sindhu** are absent. Hence it can safely said that these **Three Family Mandalas** were composed in the eastern part of Rigvedic Territory only. River **Saraswati** is the common factor in these Mandalas. The most probable reason for the absence of "**Sapta-Sindhu**" term in them is, these three Mandalas were composed mainly in and around "**Sapta-Sindhu**" region of the **Rigvedic Territory**, hence the said term is not included.

Above statement is based on the logic that "a person belonging to a particular region or a country does not introduce himself/herself to a fellow citizen that he /she is the citizen of that country". This can be explained further as a man who is born and brought up in Maharashtra state of India does not tell his neighbour that he is the native of Maharashtra, unless it is called for. This is because, he expects from other person to know that Maharashtra is his home-state. Whereas, when same man visits other state of India or other country, then he does not mind in introducing himself as a person from Maharashtra state India.

In other words, the **Poets** of **Mandala-3**, **6**, and **7** did not use "**Sapta-Sindhu**" term in their composition as at that time they were mostly staying in and around the "**Sapta-Sindhu**" region which was the original land of their ancestors. As a matter of fact, on some occasions, they used other equivalent terms to indicate "**Seven Rivers**" in these Three Mandalas.

Table-4 provides information on the presence of the rivers in the Four Family Mandalas.

Table-4

Mandala Number	Names of the Rivers Mentioned
3	**Saraswati**, Drsadwati, Apaya, ***Sutudri***, ***Vipas***
6	**Saraswati**, Hariyupia, Yayvavati, Ganga
7	**Saraswati**, ***Parusni***, Yamuna
5	**Saraswati**, ***Parusni,*** Yamuna (rivers from eastern territory) Sindhu, Kubha, Rasa, Sarayu, Krumu, Anitabha, (rivers from western region)

Table-4 data exhibit presence of river **Saraswati** in all Four Mandalas. Additionally, occurence of the names of the rivers belonging to "**Sapta-Sindhu**" locality like ***Sutudri***, ***Vipas,***

Parusni does manifest that the Composers must have resided in the region for a very long duration.

It is to be noted here that the Singers from **Atri** family (**Mandala-5 Composers**) did not use any phrase related to "**Seven Rivers**" at all.

VI. Summary:

- **Use of "Sapta-Sindhu" phrase by the Composers of Six Mandalas implies that since inception of Rigved, the Rigvedic Priests were fully aware of the location of the "Seven Important Rigvedic Rivers".**
- **The Poets of Mandala-2 and 4 used the "Sapta-Sindhu" term mainly to highlight the real problem of water scarcity in the region that they addressed it in a poetic style as "Indra kills Ahi and then releases water in the seven rivers *or* Indra makes the Seven Rivers to flow". Same thing holds true for the two verses of Mandala-10 as well.**
- **Rv-1.35,8**; and **Rv-8.24,27 are the two out of eleven references found in Two Separate Late Mandalas do manifest use of "Sapta-Sindhu" phrase as the Land or Country.**
- **The Composer of Younger Avesta did use the term " Hapta-Hendu/Sapta-Sindhu" as the region or country of the Aryas/People. It also hints at the cultural and linguistic closeness of the Avestan People to the People of "Sapta-Sindhu".**
- **Absence of "Sapta-Sindhu" phrase in Mandala-3, 6, and 7 probably indicates that these Three Mandalas would have been composed in the region of "Seven Rivers". But on some occasions, the Singers have used other terms that reflect "Seven Rivers".**
- **The Poets of 'Atri" clan neither used "Sapta-Sindhu" term nor included other terms related to "Seven Rivers" in their compositions.**
- **The verse Rv-10.43,3 underlines the fact that at the time of composition of the 10th Mandala of Rigved too, "Sapta-Sindhu" the Seven Rigvedic Rivers were rain-dependent.**

VII. Reference:

1. "Rig Veda"(Bilingual), Translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith (1896) in PDF

2. "Rig Veda" (Griffith Translation)-Table of Content, Alphabetical frequency etc. from the Intratext Digital Library available on www.Intratext .com

3. Monier-Williams Dictionary

"It is relatively easy to question someone's answer than answering his/her question."